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Olympe de Gouges: A Woman too Revolutionary for Revolution

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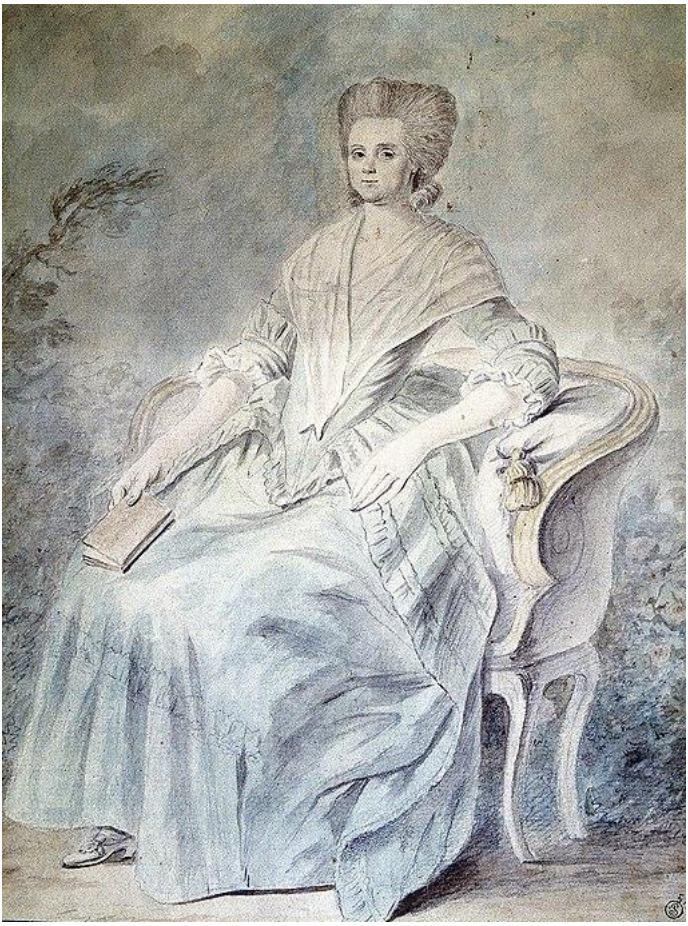

The painting *Marie Olympe de Gouges, veuve Aubry (1748-1793)* was painted in 1793 by an unknown artist. Olympe de Gouges was a political activist whose writings on women's rights and abolitionism reached a large audience in several countries.

OLYMPE DE GOUGES: A WOMAN TOO REVOLUTIONARY FOR REVOLUTION

By Grace A. Green

"Woman, wake up; the tocsin of reason is resounding throughout the universe: acknowledge your rights."[1] These powerful words of Olympe de Gouges and can be found in the postscript of the D*éclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* ("Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen"). Well known by historians, and often studied parallel to the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* ("Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen"). This document publicly professes some of the first feminist ideas in France. But who was the woman who wrote them? Olympe de Gouges was a forerunner of feminist thought in France. She was a playwright and political activist who was unafraid to speak out against injustice. De Gouges was abrasive and aggressive but was also able to balance her passion with reason, in her relentless pursuit of the betterment of women. These qualities allowed her to effectively communicate her ideas to the public and distinguish herself from her contemporaries. She was a woman who was often too revolutionary for the revolution.

In the eighteenth century, France had nearly twenty million people living within its borders. Eighty percent of all people lived in rural villages, while others were scattered in small urban cities of less than 50,000 people. The cities were home to the wealthy, while ninety percent of peasants lived at or below the subsistence level and occupied the countryside.[2] Not only was France economically stratified, but it was socially stratified as well.

[1] Olympe de Gouges, "Declaration of The Rights of Woman and Female Citizen," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, September 1791, http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/293/.

[2] Ibid

The French social hierarchy consisted of the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate.[3] After the Reformation and the split of the church, the clergy did not hold as much power as they once did, "the wealth of the Catholic clergy was a liability to its social importance, compromising both the influence and the cohesion of the Church".[4] The clergy accounted for a very small percentage of the total population (about 130,000 members). Although only slightly larger than the clergy, the nobility was the true aristocracy. To be a noble you had to be born a noble; however, the changing economy and the repetitive division of land as inheritance diminished the wealth of the feudal nobility and allowed for a new group to rise in to their place, the bourgeoisie.[5] The bourgeoisie were the "richest and most capable" members of the Third Estate. They typically did not gain their wealth from manual labor but from investment. They were referred to as, "living nobility".[6] The bourgeoisie also relished in special privileges known as, "rights of the city."[7]

On January 24, 1789, Louis XVI summoned the Estates-General. The Estates-General was a legislative body, constructed of the three different social classes, the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate. The Third Estate made up a majority of the population and was a mix of everyone who was not a member of the clergy or nobility. Despite the unequal population distribution between the groups, each group had only one vote. This lead to a small, wealthy portion of the population making

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[3] Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From its Origins to 1793,* trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson (New York: Colombia University Press, 1962), 38.

[4] Ibid, 41

[5] Ibid, 42

[6] "Social Causes of the Revolution"

[7] "Bourgeois/Bourgeoisie," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,* accessed November 20, 2019, http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/1066.

the decisions for all. The Third Estate broke away from the Estates-General and formed the National Assembly on June 17, 1789, after Louis XIV denied their request of "voting by head", which would have given the members of the Third Estate an equal voice.[8] On June 20, 1789, after being locked out of their regular meeting place, the Third Estate met at a nearby tennis court and made an oath that they would continue to meet until France had an established constitution.[9]

During this time, intellectual changes were also sweeping across France. A new way of thinking was challenging the old traditions. Although many of the leading Enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau, were dead by the time the revolution came along, their ideas and influence survived and "armed the bourgeois with a new philosophy which encouraged class consciousness and a bold inventive spirit."[10] The ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, were the driving forces behind the Revolution. On August 26, 1789,[11] the National Assembly constructed the, *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, which listed what they thought to be inalienable rights of man. This document became the preamble to the 1791 constitution and a major source of criticism for Olympe de Gouges. The political climate in France was shifting and it led to the eventual fall of the monarchy. In August 1792, Robespierre was elected first deputy for Paris to the National

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[8] "Estates-General*," Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed November 20, 2019, http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/1087.

[9] "The Tennis Court Oath," Revolutionary Tradition, accessed November 20, 2019, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist255/kat_anna/tennis.html.

[10] Lefebvre, 54.

[11] "Some Key Moments in the French Revolution," Purdue, accessed November 20, 2019, https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~wggray/Teaching/His104/Lectures/Revln-Timeline.html.

Convention.[12] This changing world of France was the world in which of Olympe de Gouges lived. She spent her life adding to the conversation and challenging the idea that social and political rights are not just for men, but also women.

Marie Gouze was born May 7, 1748, to a cloth maker named Anne Olympe Mouisset Gouze and her husband Pierre Gouze, who both belonged to the bourgeoisie.[13] Marie Gouze was married at the age of sixteen to Louis-Yves Aubry[14] and became the mother of a son, Pierre Aubry on August 29, 1766. Her husband died in the winter of that same year[15]. Following his death, in the year 1773, Marie Gouze changed her name to Olympe de Gouges[16] and moved to Paris to join the political conversation. In her youth, de Gouges did not receive a formal education. Her primary language was Occitan, a regional dialect of French and she was limited in her reading and writing skills.[17] She wrote many of her plays and pamphlets in a combination of both French and Occitan. The move to Paris, following her husband's death, was a rebirth for Olympe de Gouges, starting with her strategically selected new name. She took her mother's maiden name as her own and replaced the 'z' with a 'g' to turn 'Gouze' to 'Gouge'. 'Gouge' also happens to be an offensive term

[12] "Maximilien Robespierre," BBC, last modified 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/robespierre_maximilien.shtml.

[13] Sophie Mousset, *Women's Rights and the French Revolution: A Biography of Olympe de Gouges* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 10-11.

[14] Joshua Rivas, "The Radical Novelty of Olympe de Gouges," *Nottingham French Studies 53*, no. 3 (2014): 346.

[15] "Olympe De Gouges Timeline," Olympe De Gouge, last modified December, 2019, https://www.olympedegouges.eu/timeline.php.

[16] There are several different spellings of her name, but for this paper I will be using "Olympe de Gouges".

[17] Mousset, 12.

in Occitan, meaning "a lowly woman accused of bawdiness."[18] She also included a 'de', which was an article reserved for the aristocracy.

Her connection to the aristocrats was based upon a rumor, thought to have been started by de Gouges herself, that her biological father was Jean-Jacques Lefranc (or Le Franc), Marquis de Pompignan.[19] Lefranc was an aristocratic playwright and poet, who supposedly had an affair with de Gouges' mother.[20] The knowledge of Lefranc's paternity helps to further understand de Gouges' split identity. Sophie Moussett described her as someone who "belonged to both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy".[21]

Her transformation from practically illiterate, young widow to radical revolutionary came under the providence of her aristocratic lover, Jacques Biétrix de Roziéres, who was a wealthy weapons merchant. They met in 1776 and although they lived together until her death and he acted as her husband, she refused to marry.[22] De Gouges described marriage as "the tomb of trust and love."[23] In granting herself the aristocratic title and with the help of Roziére's status, she gained access into Parisian society. She positioned herself in the salons where Enlightenment thinkers of the time discussed their ideas and she relished

[18] Rivas, 346.

[19] Rivas, 346 and Mousset, 12.

[20] Jean-Jacques Lefranc, Marquis de Pompignan," Encyclopedia Britannica 1911, last modified September 29, 2018, https://theodora.com/encyclopedia/p2/jean_jacques_lefranc_marquis_de_pompignan.html.

[21] Mousset, 15.

[22] "Olympe de Gouges Timeline," Olympe De Gouge, last modified December, 2019, https://www.olympedegouges.eu/timeline.php.

[23] Roni Bar, "Olympe de Gouges, the Radical French Feminist Who Was Murdered Twice," Haaretz, November 3, 2017, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-radical-french-feminist-who-was-murdered-twice-1.5462530.

in democratic and revolutionary thought.[24] Usually organized by prominent women, salons were gatherings that provided a safe place where men and women alike could engage in intellectual discourse. Although women were sometimes "mocked for their intellectual ventures." the walls of the salons provided them with a freedom of speech that was exclusively reserved for men.[25] De Gouges was a "femme de lettres" (woman of the letters)[26] and used her talents as a writer to express her political views to the public.

De Gouges' decision to be a playwright was a "transgressive choice for a woman"[27] because plays were a public form of writing. The first play she wrote, in 1782, was the first abolitionist play written in France. It was entitled the *The Fortunate Shipwreck,* but the name was later changed to *Enslavement of Blacks.*[28] This work was accepted by the Comédie Française in 1782, but not performed until 1789. Olympe De Gouges' experience was one of anger and frustration. She tirelessly wrote the troupe leaders, Florence and Delaporte, and eventually demanded a meeting to make her case in person. Fortunately, a meeting did take place. However, the disengagement of the members at the meeting was the cause of De Gouges' "explosion of bitter complaints"[29], and loss of self-control. The meeting resulted in Florence revoking her

[24] Maire Josephine Diamond, "Olympe de Gouges and the French Revolution: The Construction of Gender as Critique", *Dialectical Anthropology 15*, no. 3 (1990): 96.

[25] Alan Riding, "Birth of the Salon," New York Times, November 5, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/20/books/review/birth-of-the-salon.html.

[26] Gregory S. Brown, "The Self-Fashioning of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789", *Eighteenth-Century Studies 34*, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 383.

[27] Diamond, 97.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Brown, 387.

privileges to the theater and removing her play from the register.[30] De Gouges complained of harassment of the troupe to Duc de Richeleu, a French nobleman. He responded by ordering Lieutenant-General of Police for Paris, Louis Thrioux de Crosne, to restore her entrance privileges and her play to its repertory. De Gouges wrote in a polite and pacifying tone to the Comédie Française, and they were reconciled. Through the combination of her aggressive outbursts, tempered by her redeeming gestures of polite reconciliation, De Gouges' response to these events demonstrated the "mastery of the politics and rhetoric of the literary culture."[31]

Olympe de Gouges has earned the title of "first French feminist".[32] Through the publishing of her pamphlets that demanded reform, she spoke out aggressively against injustices and fought relentlessly for the rights of women. In April of 1789 she wrote, *Dialogue allégorique* ("Allegorical Dialogue"). This was an allegorical dialogue between France and Truth, dedicated to the Estates-General. She asserts that women have the capability and should be allowed to participate in state affairs. She writes, "It is unjust of men to refuse admittance to women into the affairs of state and to refuse to give up some of their powers when women would be more than able to use them wisely."[33]

In September 1789, de Gouges lamented a woman's inability to participate in politics, *Action héroïque D'une Française* (Heroic Action of a French Woman) addressed women who wish to participate in political events, such as the Estates-General. It expresses similar

[30] Brown, 387.

[31] Brown, 388.

[32] Brown, 383.

[33] Olympe de Gouges, "Dialogue allégorique," Olympe De Gouges, last modified December 2019, https://www.olympedegouges.eu/dialog_allegorique.php.

sentiments of the injustice in denying women the right to take part in reforming France,

> "Virtuous women, female citizens who are enflamed by the saintly zeal of patriotism, it is to you that I address the feeble fruits of my talent. No doubt, at this moment, you lament the fact that you can only wish for the happiness of France. Instead your fathers, husbands and brothers can work for the regeneration of this Empire: you would love to second them in this great work."[34]

De Gouges believed strongly in the equality of the sexes. This is especially emphasized in her later works, including her February,1792 poster, *Le Bon sens du français* (The Frenchman's Common Sense). In this poster she expresses the desire for the right of divorce to be an equality in marriage and proposes the creation of a fair system of separation. She asked the question, "Do you want to establish love and harmony within families or allow fear and mistrust to reign?"[35] In doing so, she suggested that the only path to a loving and harmonious marriage is equality.

Perhaps de Gouges' most famous work, was the pamphlet she published in September, 1791, just weeks before the new French constitution was complete- D*éclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* ("Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen"). De Gouges's work is a criticism of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen).

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[34] Olympe de Gouges, "héroïque D'une Française," Olympe De Gouges, last modified December 2019, https://www.olympedegouges.eu/action_heroique.php

[35] Olympe de Gouges, "Le Bon sens du français," Olympe De Gouges, last modified December 2019, https://www.olympedegouges.eu/french_commonsense.php.

She used the parallel structure to expose the shortcomings of the revolutionary rhetoric. Her critique of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* began in the title with the word, "citoyen". Joshua Rivas writes,

> "The lack of an official term to designate a female *citoyen* was symptomatic of the uncertain relationship between woman and state during the ongoing period of turmoil and change preceding and during the revolution. Olympe de Gouges, seized on the opportunity that this ambiguity provided...opting for the term 'citoyenne' in lieu of the previously existing 'citoyen'." [36]

The lack of a word for a female citizen and de Gouges's explicit use of her own personally coined word, citoyenne, emphasizes the incongruency of 'man' and 'citizen' by highlighting the idea that the rights reserved for citizens are only given to men. De Gouges further explored these incongruencies throughout the Declaration. The Authors of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* were Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson. They were both advocates for the rights of man and they centered their thinking around the idea that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights."[37] De Gouges also used this same central ideal in her D*éclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenn*e, but added her own feminine voice to exploit the lack of equality in a document meant to serve as the basis for equality in a society. Two of the most obvious examples of the need for a feminine

[36] Rivas, 348.

[37] "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," The Avalon Project, 1789, accessed on October 27, 2019, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp.

voice is found in articles seven and eleven of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen.* Article Seven states,

> "No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned except in the cases according to the forms prescribed by law. Any on soliciting, transmitting, executing, or causing to be executed, any arbitrary order, shall be punished. But any citizen summoned or arrested in virtue of law shall submit without delay, as resistance constitutes an offense."[38]

De Gouges' D*éclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* article seven simply states,

> "No woman is an exception; she is accused, arrested, and detained in cases determined by law. Women, like men, obey this rigorous law."[39]

This was an important variation made my de Gouges. She was demanding full equality under the law. She not only fought for the equality when it was advantageous for women, but demanded complete equality of man and woman in punishment as well. Article eleven of both declarations also hold an important variation regarding freedom of speech. It is written in the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen,*

> "The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law."[40]

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[38] Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

[39] Declaration of The Rights of Woman and Female Citizen

[40] Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

While De Gouges writes,

> "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of every woman, since that liberty assures recognition of children by their fathers. Any female citizen thus may say freely, I am the mother of a child which belongs to you, without being forced by a barbarous prejudice to hide the truth; (an exception may be made) to respond to the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by law."[41]

The social norm of the day was that men were allowed to decide if they wanted to claim legitimate fatherhood of child or publicly dismiss the mother as a liar. De Gouges' addition, of the right of a woman to claim parental legitimacy, to the eleventh article highlights her demand for women's voices to be equally heard in all areas, both political and social.

Surrounded by revolutionary thinkers, de Gouges was by no means the only French feminist of the time. Madame Roland and Theroigne de Mericourt added to the political conversation and advocated for the rights of women. Madame Roland was the wife of Girondist Minister of the Interior, Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière[42]. Starting in the spring of 1971, at the Hotel Britannique, Roland and her husband hosted a salon.[43]. Unlike de Gouges, Madame Roland, "had never openly written a political pamphlet or spoke publicly." [44] She

[41] "Declaration of The Rights of Woman and Female Citizen"

[42] Brigitte Szymanek, "French Revolutionary Writings: Madame Roland or the Pleasure of the Mask." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 15*, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 99.

[43] Ida B. Tarbel, *Madame Roland: A Biographical Study* (New York: Moffat. Yard and Company, 1909), 323.

[44] Szymanek, 99

desired to participate in the politics of the revolution, but only under the refuge of her husband's name. Roland had great intellectual influence over him and wrote many of his speeches and letters, which he delivered without any revision.[45] She even wrote his letter of resignation to the King.[46] However, Roland had an attachment to Rousseau's model of femininity, as she had grown up studying him.[47] According to Rousseau, "at the core of a woman's being stood the need to make themselves pleasing to men, in order to secure a man's protection."[48] Roland desired a greater sphere of influence for women, but also felt a duty toward her domestic province. She used her husband's voice to engage in political conversation, because she believed it to be the most effective way to get people to hear her ideas.

Antithetical to Madame Roland is Théroigne de Mericourt. Similar to de Gouges, de Mericourt was self-educated, involved romantically with an aristocratic man, and also added a "de" to her name in order to claim aristocracy and further advance her ideas into the political conversation.[49] One of her main demands was the right for women to be armed and able to participate in revolutionary wars.[50] She held strongly to the belief that if women were to be considered equal to men they need to be equal in all aspects, including the right to bear

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[45] Szymanek, 100

[46] Lisa Beckstrand," Oylmpe de Gouges and Manon Roland: Constructions of Feminine Identity Within the Context of the French Revolution" (PhD. Diss., University of Wisconsin, 1997), 55.

[47] Szymanek, 101

[48] Jennifer M. Jones, "Repackaging Rousseau: Femininity and Fashion in Old Regime France," *French Historical Studies 18,* no.4 (Autumn 1994): 944.

[49] Diamond, 97

[50] Jessamine Gaul, "Theroigne de Mericourt," Women in Modern European History, last modified 2019, http://hist259.web.unc.edu/mericourt/.

arms.[51] De Mericourt was involved in several violent attacks and is credited with killing several Royalist during the Parisian storming of the palace on August 10, 1792.[52] Although she is seen as a "militant feminist", one of the deficiencies to her overly-militant approach was her inability to be heard.[53] Her actions were too outrageous for a woman of her time and it called into question her sanity. Against her will, she was placed in an asylum by her brother in September 1794.[54]

Madame Roland's words were used, but her voice was never heard. She hid behind her husband's name, and de Mericourt's voice was drowned out the irrationality of her actions. But De Gouges was able to control her passion and boldly and effectively proclaim her ideas to the public. She was zealously persistent and wrote over thirty-six plays and pamphlets from 1788 to her death in 1793. As a skilled writer she used her words to speak out for justice. In 1793, she wrote, *Olympe de Gouges au Tribunal révolutionnaire*, in which she openly attacked Robespierre,

> "Robespierre has always seemed to me to be an ambitious man, with no talent, no soul. He seemed to me ever ready to sacrifice the entire nation to gain his dictatorship; I could not bear this mad and sanguinary ambition and I pursued him as I pursued all tyrants. The hatred of this cowardly enemy has long hidden in

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[51] Jessamine Gaul, "Theroigne de Mericourt," Women in Modern European History, last modified 2019, http://hist259.web.unc.edu/mericourt/

[52] Peter McPhee, "Hidden Women of History: Théroigne de Mericourt, Feminist Revolutionary," The Conversation, December 31, 2018, http://theconversation.com/hidden-women-of-history-theroigne-de-mericourt-feminist-revolutionary-107802.

[53] Peter McPhee, *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.), 184.

[54] Gerri Walton, "Théroigne de Mericourt, Heroine of the French Revolution," Amazing Women in History, November 1, 2016, https://amazingwomeninhistory.com/theroigne-de-mericourt/.

> the shadows while he and his adherents waited avidly for a favorable moment to sacrifice me to his vengeance."[55]

Her work was seen as an anti-revolutionary act and she was sentenced to death by guillotine November 3 of 1793. Her words carried power and were not just merely displays of rebellion. De Gouges was an effected writer and passionate about the equality of men and women. She carefully crafted arguments, as seen in her works, *Dialogue allégorique, Action héroïque D'une Française,* and *Le Bon sens du français*, and boldly deconstructed revolutionary literature in D*éclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne.* De Gouges was able balance her passion with reason to differentiate her other feminists during the French revolution.

[55] Olympe de Gouges, "Olympe de Gouges au Tribunal revolutionnaire," Olympe De Gouges, last modified December, 2019, https://www.olympedegouges.eu/revolutionary_tribunal.php